

Budget talks should start closer to the mark: Councillors

By Brock Weir

Aurora's next budget should be completed quicker and more accurately, according to some Councillors.

Council is due to sign off on a schedule this week which would peg Aurora's 2014 Budget up for approval by either February 25 or March 18.

But, going into this Tuesday's Council meeting, some Councillors have expressed dismay on how long it takes to get there.

For Councillors Michael Thompson and John Abel, the later the budget process goes, the longer residents will stew before a final tax rate is reached. This could be seen in the 2013 budget process when Councillors started off with a projected 8.3 per cent tax increase for this year, a rate which was ultimately whittled down to 3.77.

?Some of the feedback we heard the last time around is the proposed increase was quite high,? said Councillor Thompson. ?It seemed quite apparent around this table that there was no appetite to accept it as-is and it upset the residents that such a number was being proposed.

?As we worked through the budget process and brought it down to the final number that was approved, it looked like it was artificially inflated so we would be able to tackle it and bring it down. I have some concerns about that process whereby we're going to bring forward another budget with a proposed budget that might be higher than we all realise will be accepted. The last thing we want to do is send the wrong message.?

Councillor Abel expressed a similar viewpoint, but through the length of time it is going to be to get to that final conclusion. The process, he said, ?sets up months of negative responses? until Council can finally get to the ?gist? of the budget.

?By the time we get it whittled down, we take our share of criticism at every level,? he said. ?That is because it is open and transparent, and I really have no issue with that, [but] what I find disappointing is other municipalities like East Gwillimbury...and Newmarket will have theirs done by December.

?I thought we had the same sort of consensus [on doing things earlier] and we have done absolutely nothing.?

For Councillor Pirri, Councillors have asked ?multiple times? to start earlier, but it still continues to be status quo. He questioned why more things aren't being done over the summer to lay the budget groundwork.

In response, Dan Elliott, Treasurer for the Town of Aurora, said job evaluations internally took his department much longer to complete and the process has been lagging with a vacancy in the position of Manager of Financial Planning, although that job has now been filled and will be active next week.

?I did solicit some feedback from the 2013 process and unfortunately I didn't hear those comments at that time,? he said. ?I heard nothing. ?Going into this fall, we were under the status quo approach. I am hearing comments around the table [and] we can have a discussion about expectations around the budget process and how much time?but I don't think I can do that before Christmas this year.?

Some Councillors, however, expressed satisfaction with the length of time it will take the budget from start to finish. For Councillor Buck, a lengthy process was a hallmark of the importance of the budget. She said there is no more important task for a Councillor each year than completing the budget and to do it right takes time.

?Everything stems from the budget and we could certainly be more efficient if we just rubber-stamped everything that is put before us by staff and there is no political input whatsoever,? she said. ?Everything we do is out in the open there is no stone left unturned,

and that doesn't worry me at all.?

This view was bolstered by Councillors Sandra Humfries and John Gallo. Everybody would love to have the budget process shorter, said Councillor Humfries, but on the flipside it is important to do it as thoroughly as possible. It's not wasting time, it's using time effectively, she concluded. For Councillor Gallo, however, now that Council has increased the threshold to which municipal departments can spend on items that have already been budgeted for without returning to Council for approval, this is a year to be more vigilant.

?I am committed to spending much more time on the budget than I may have in the past because we changed our procedural bylaw of the threshold staff can spend without coming back to us.? said Councillor Gallo. ?It is going to be our only opportunity to see some of those projects and the only time to ask question and get feedback from staff.?

Mayor Geoffrey Dawe also supported the plan brought forward by Mr. Elliott.

?We need to look at what has gone on over the last couple of years,? said Mayor Dawe. ?Mr. Elliott and [Town Clerk John] Leach have worked very hard to put together a 10 year capital forecast that we have never had. It took a lot of time and resources for him to do. He can do that, or he can do something else.

?These are very essential elements to allow us to actually move into a more efficient and effective budget. I believe that has the underpinnings [of] getting into that place where we could be far more efficient and have that capability in the future.?